

Students light up with bulb-recycling program

By JOSHUA ADAM HICKS
Staff Writer

Science teacher John Schmied had an idea — as though the proverbial light bulb appeared above his head.

The plan was to enlist around 135 of his Skyview Junior High seventh-graders to support a three-county effort aimed at recycling fluorescent bulbs.

Schmied had been teaching the benefits of using the energy efficient devices when a flaw became apparent: the bulbs contain mercury, which means they pose a threat to the environment when disposed of improperly.

"They're a good thing because they save money and conserve energy, but there's an environmental cost on the other end," he said. "It's a small amount of mercury, but when you're talking about 10 million bulbs coming around over the next few years, it's going to be a problem."

Schmied's students researched the matter and learned that compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) are rarely recycled. The nearest collection facility, in fact, is about 15 miles from their school.

The students also discovered an initiative by Pierce, King and Snohomish counties to create a directory of sites where residents can pay between 50 cents and 75 cents to have the bulbs recycled.



Submitted by John Schmied
McLendon Hardware's Ron Neubaum chats with, left to right, Alex Reynolds, Nellie Bourne, Don Hon, Taylor MacKenzie and Alex Rodes (not shown) about the bulb-recycling program.

A group of 17 retail businesses, repair shops, nonprofits and waste haulers are now included on that list, known as the Take It Back Network.

Schmied's students set out to add at least one more. Six of them volunteered to pitch the idea to Rob Neubaum, who manages McLendon Hardware in Woodinville.

But the stores already had a bulb-recycling program.

Schmied had prepared his students for this type of challenge. He made them practice articulating ideas and thinking on their feet during an hour-long practice ses-

sion after school.

They found an opening. McLendon's recycling program was suffering from a lack of awareness.

"We don't get that many people, mainly, I think, because people don't know about it," Neubaum told the Reporter.

Schmied's group suggested that McLendon could achieve better results by joining the Take It Back Network.

"This is the first time that a school has been interested in helping recruit partners," said Lauren Cole, a project coordinator for the Take It Back program in King County.

"I was really excited about that because it's a big motivator to businesses. It's one thing for me to go out and promote this, but to have customers approach them is an added bonus."

McLendon agreed in July to join the network, and is currently working with King County to implement the program at all six of its stores.

"We've decided to step it up a notch or two," said company spokeswoman Suzanne Thompson. "We're really hitting heavy on recycling and the environment, and trying to get green products into this store. Anything we can do

to help the community, we do."

Schmied incorporates two weeks of ecology and environment-related study into his curriculum each year. He is also working with other science teachers at Skyview to find ways of expanding that program.

"I want it to be spread out across the entire year instead of being two weeks and a cloud of dust," Schmied said.

The research and subsequent recycling proposal done by Schmied's students follow an action-projects model that he utilizes, whereby kids learn about problems and come up with real-life solutions.

"You talk about issues and wonder what you can do besides say, 'Well, this is terrible,'" Schmied said. "They don't just learn about the problems, but how to act on them."

"It's a lot more work for me, but it gives you a lot of energy to do things where we can make a difference. It makes school real."

Schmied has undertaken action projects with his students in the past. The largest involved establishing an outdoor environmental learning center at Skyview that includes restored wetlands, more than 700 meters of trail and newly planted native vegetation that replaced invasive species.

The long-term goal of his venture is to replicate that project along the school's entire periphery and expand the wetlands to twice their current size.

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